

# On the Middle construction and Modality in Modern Greek<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper attempts to define middle constructions in MG by examining two types of transitivity alternations: (i) affix mediated and (ii) nonaffix mediated ones. On the basis of what I consider to be the key characteristics of middles in this language, namely modality and the presence of an implicit arbitrary agent, I conclude that the Passive Affix (PA) is required as a necessary part of middle formation in MG. Other parameters related to the middle are also examined, such as genericity and adverbial modification.*

## 0. Introduction

What has been known as middle construction is a type of transitivity alternation attested in a number of languages. Among european languages there seems to be great variety in the way the middle morphologically manifests itself: with a pronominal clitic (French, Italian), a pseudo-reflexive (German), a passive affix (MG) or simply with the verb in its active form (English, Dutch, partly MG).

With regard to MG, it is important to note that while using the term 'middle' I will not be referring either to 'middle voice' in the Ancient Greek sense, or to middle verbs in the sense of a uniform morphological category which exhibits mediopassive morphology but whose semantics falls somewhere between 'active' and 'passive' meaning.

In order to clarify which constructions should count as middles in MG, I will examine two types of transitivity alternation: (i) **affix-mediated** ( which involves the reversal of the subject-object grammatical relations and the addition of the passive affix to the main predicate) & (ii) **non affix-mediated** ones (in which grammatical relations are also reversed, this time without the addition of passive morphology to the main verb). The question I will try to address with regard to these alternations is whether we can group them together as middle constructions.

Prototypical transitive verbs only may serve as input to the affix-mediated alternation:

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- (1) a. i astinomikes istories δjavazonte efɣarista  
 the detective stories-NOM read-PA-3pl pleasantly  
 'Detective stories read pleasantly.'

The nonaffix-mediated alternation on the other hand requires ergative verbs as its input:

- b. afta ta potiria spane efkola  
 these the glasses-NOM break-ACT-3pl easily  
 'These glasses break easily.'

The term 'ergative' has been used in the relevant literature with roughly the same sense as the term 'inchoative'. Both terms refer to verbs which typically exhibit the causative-inchoative alternation in English and MG. Specifically, they refer to the intransitive member of a causative-alternating verb pair like the following.

- (2) to payoto *eli*ose(intrans.) sti zesti/apo ti zesti. / i zesti *eli*ose(trans.)  
 to payoto<sup>2</sup>  
 'The ice-cream melted in the heat. / The heat melted the ice-cream.'

The verb *diavazo* in 1(a), like its English equivalent *read* belongs to the class of standard transitives with an <agent, theme> argument structure. Such verbs are usually successful candidates for middle formation in languages like French, English, German (see Fagan 1992 for attested examples). Observe that passive affixation is an essential requirement for Middle Formation of this class of predicates in MG. The lack of it results in ungrammaticality, contrary to what is the case in English:

- (3) \*i astinomikes istories δjavazun efɣarista  
 the detective stories-NOM read-ACT-3pl pleasantly  
 'Detective stories read pleasantly.'

The similarities and differences between middles and ergatives were pointed out and sufficiently analysed in the literature (Fagan 1992, Keyser and Roeper 1984, Hale and Keyser 1986, 1987 for English; Kakouriotis 1994, Condoravdi 1989 for MG). I am briefly summarising them here.

**Similarities:** in both middles and ergatives the subject is a *theme*, and a specific agent by-phrase is not admissible.

<sup>2</sup> This sentence can be paraphrased in the following way: *I zesti ekane to pagoto na liosi.*



It should be noted, however, that in the context of middle constructions the verbs *agapo*, *vlepo*, *simpatō*, *akuo* acquire a nonstative interpretation.

A preliminary remark is in place here with regard to the alleged stativity of middle constructions. Fagan (1992) claimed that middle constructions as a whole denote states whereas ergatives denote events. The same claim was made by Keyser and Roeper (1984). I will not agree with the above claims, since they are not consonant with the key features I will attribute to middles in a later section. Instead, I will assume that middles can be qualified as predicating an individual-level property of the original internal argument.

The process of middle formation in MG is productive even with verbs taking cognate objects.

- (6) *χorevete poli efkola aftos o choros*  
 dance-PA-3s very easily this the dance-NOM

Putting together the most important descriptive facts, it is rather obvious that middles in Modern Greek have the patient /theme of the corresponding transitive sentence occupy the subject position like their English counterparts, while the agent theta-role is suppressed in both languages. The crucial difference between the two languages lies in that the verb in a middle uniformly preserves its active form in the case of English, while it would seem that MG allows two possibilities (Condoravdi 1989 and Kakouriotis 1994): (i) affix-mediated middles (ii) non affix-mediated middles. It remains to be seen whether this classification is fully justified.

## 2. Deriving the basic properties of the MG middle

The middle construction has been associated with a variety of syntactic and semantic properties in the literature. The **syntactic** properties usually have to do with the following:

- a. the transitivity of the verb which is central to the formation of the middle
- b. the suppression of the external argument ( closely related to property a)
- c. the requirement for adverbial modification
- d. the requirement for generic interpretation
- e. a specific aspectual requirement: [+imperfective, +nonpast]
- f. presence of a generic/arbitrary by-phrase

The **semantic**<sup>3</sup> properties which have been frequently associated with the middle could be stated as follows:

<sup>3</sup> Fagan (1992) has examined the impact of semantic notions such as agentivity, affectedness and responsibility (of the surface subject) on the formation of the middle in English, German and French. Of these, **responsibility** only was considered

- a. Some kind of semantic characterization of the verbs that may enter the construction
- b. Aspectual considerations - stative interpretation of middles [+imp. aspect]
- c. Modality reading
- d. Implicit presence of the agent theta-role

There is no doubt that most syntactic properties inevitably interact with some of the semantic properties and vice versa; in this respect the syntactic-semantic division is rather arbitrary and is maintained for expository purposes only.

Let us examine how most of the above properties can be shown to interact with each other.

As a general rule, middles are formed from transitive predicates<sup>4</sup>, that is, predicates with a direct object in the accusative case. Whenever a transitive verb undergoes the process of middle formation, the direct object is realized as the nominative subject of the resulting middle construction. This grammatical function changing phenomenon brings about a number of syntactic consequences, such as agent suppression and, one by one, the syntactic properties (c-e).

There have been endless debates in the literature on the nature of the derivation of middle constructions, ie., on the question of whether it takes place in the lexicon or in the syntax. In my view, there can be no uniform treatment of the middle even among related languages. This is due to (i) the entirely different means, morphological and syntactic, each language employs to express the middle and (ii) the considerable variation in the **interpretation requirements** of the middle cross-linguistically. It is reasonable to assume that reason (ii) is a consequence of (i) to a greater or lesser extent. For instance, Authier & Reed (1996:514), in their discussion of the Canadian French middle, offer the attested example below (I am only giving their French example and its exact English translation equivalent):

- (7) En general, ces débats s'enregistrent par Anne, qui est notre technicienne la plus qualifiée.  
'Generally, these debates are recorded by Anne, who is our most qualified technician'

(Authier & Reed 1996)

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to be a distinctive property of the middle subject. Kakouriotis (1994) has analysed the importance of the affectedness constraint in MG middle formation.

<sup>4</sup> Middles may also be formed from intransitive predicates in certain languages, in which case they are referred to as *impersonal middles*. This is the case in German for example (Fagan 1992:19). We do not find impersonal middles in the relevant sense neither in English nor in MG.

They are offering this example as an instance of a middle that displays the features [+nongeneric], [+eventive], [+specific agent by-phrase], thus contradicting the standard claim that the above are properties exclusive to the passive.

I will postpone a detailed discussion of the middle derivation for later. For the time being I will assume, following Tsimpli (1989), that in the case of MG middles the mediopassive affix attaches to the verb in the syntax and not in the lexicon. We have a middle derivation parallel to the passive derivation, the crucial difference being that the middle has a very strong interpretation requirement: that of the **modality** reading. Middles have been argued to be generic sentences in the literature for independent reasons (Sioupi 1998). I wish to claim that it is precisely the modality reading of middles that renders them generic statements. This is important because as we will show there could be instances of genericity without modality. The examples in (8) demonstrate this.

- (8) aftos o sinyrafeas metafrazete sixna sta yalika  
 this the writer-NOM translate-PA-3s often in French  
 'This writer is often translated in French.'  
 Afti i leksi grafete me duo - t -  
 this the word-NOM write-PA-3s with two - t -  
 'You should write this word with a double - t -'

The first example is not a middle, but a generic **passive** sentence with habitual interpretation, while the second could be interpreted either as a habitual or as a deontic passive statement, but certainly not as a middle. Note that the examples of middles in (4), (5) and (6) are not morphologically or syntactically different from the passives in (8) and could be easily confused with them. A similar confusion between (active) habituais and middles could occur in English, especially with those middles whose subjects denote individual objects rather than kinds.

Middle: My car drives nicely

Habitual generic: This baby sleeps a lot

Obviously then the distinctive feature of middles, in English and MG at least, cannot be the need for imperfective aspect or generic interpretation. I am thus making the following claim:

**The feature [+modal] is the essential requirement for middles in MG**

In semantic terms, modality has been defined by Lyons (1977) as 'the opinion or attitude of the speaker towards the content of a proposition'. The world's languages differ considerably in the way and the extent to which they grammaticalize modality. In his classical work on mood and modality, Palmer (1986) has identified three types of grammatical markers of

modality: (a) verbal inflection (inflectional mood), (b) modal verbs, (c) particles and clitics, which are exhibited by MG, English and German respectively.

In syntactic terms, the requirement for the formal feature [+modal] suggests that both Tense and Agr should be c-commanded by a modal operator (in the head of CP). Having scope over the whole sentence, this operator should inevitably force the aspectual constraint [+imperf.] on the middle. In that case the modal operator can be thought of as having a function similar to that of the generic operator in Diesing (1992).

A syntactic test that shows the presence of modality in MG middles is the ability to form the corresponding active sentence with the (root) modal *bori* and the arbitrary logical subject *kanis* (= 'anyone'). This is how the habitual / generic statement in (8) above is shown not to be a middle: its corresponding active paraphrase in (9) is ungrammatical.

- (9) \**bori kanis na metafrazi sixna sta yalika afton ton sinyrafea*  
can-3s anyone to translate-3s often in French this the writer-ACC  
'Anyone can translate this writer in French.'

On the basis of the above I can claim that there are two basic constraints on middle formation in MG: **I.** the requirement for the feature [+modal], syntactically realised as a modal operator in the head of CP **II.** the need for an *overt* subject NP in topic position, which is usually kind-referring or generic.

The first is an interpretation requirement, while the second is a syntactic requirement. All other properties characterising the middle construction can be derived from these two requirements.

The first requirement (modality reading due to [+modal]) explains the constraint on aspectual and tense features [+imperfective, +nonpast]. The asterisks below denote ungrammaticality on the modal reading of the examples. The active paraphrases actually make the point clearer.

Modality is incompatible with [+perf.] aspect and [+past] tense:

- (10) a. \**ta vivlia afta δjavastikan efcharista*  
the books-NOM these PERF-read-PA-3pl pleasantly  
b. \**δjavase kanis efcharista afta ta vivlia*  
PERF-read-3s anyone pleasantly these the books-ACC
- (11) a. \**ta vivlia afta δjavazontan efcharista/*  
the books-NOM these PAST IMPERF-read-PA-3pl  
pleasantly  
b. \**δjavase kanis efcharista afta ta vivlia*  
PAST IMPERF-read-3s anyone pleasantly these the books-ACC



It is beyond doubt then that the feature [+imperfective] plays a crucial role in middle formation and at the same time functions as a modal marker. The importance of this aspectual feature for MG middles has been stressed by both Tsimpli (1989) and Giannakidou (1993). The latter has also insisted on the dissociation of past tense morphology from modality in MG on the grounds that this language collapses two features under past tense morphology: [+past] and [+perfective], thus rendering the verbal form resistant to modal readings and, in fact, excluding such readings from the inventory of the possible interpretations.

Viewing middles as modal statements also explains why they are incompatible with a [+specific] by-phrase. The addition of a specific by-phrase automatically transforms middles into habitual passive statements. The sentence below is therefore passive and not a middle:

- (12) \* ta vivlia                      afta δjavazonte      efcharista apo to jani.  
The books-NOM these read-PA-3pl      pleasantly by Janis-ACC

A generic by-phrase on the other hand is perfectly acceptable in middles:

- (13) afti i apostasi perpatiete      aneta apo opjondipote  
this the distance walks-PA-3s easily by anyone

I have to make clear that I am speaking of root and not epistemic modality when referring to middle constructions. According to Palmer (1986), dynamic root modality expresses 'the speaker's observations about his own or other people's inherent capacities, in relation to his/their involvement in the action expressed by the main verb'. Therefore, the dynamic root modality reading of *he can play the piano* is 'he has the ability or skill to play the piano'. Of course root modality is not exhausted in this definition and notions such as possibility, subjectivity and (non)factuality are still associated with it. Specifically, the two key features of subjectivity and non-factuality are shared by both epistemic and deontic senses according to Palmer (1986:96). The fact that modality is essentially subjective points at a distinction between the modal and propositional elements in a sentence. I assume that it is this distinction that licenses sentential markers of 'opinion expression' with MG middles:

- (14) kata ti ynomi mu afta ta miθistorimata γrafonte xoris kopu  
'In my opinion it is easy to write these novels'  
kata ti ynomi mu ta piimata afta metaφrazonte δiskola  
'In my opinion it is hard to translate these poems''



The possibility of adding a sentential adjunct denoting personal opinion to ergatives will be checked in the section that immediately follows.

### 3. Modality and the MG Ergative

Turning now to the ergative alternation in MG, it cannot be easily claimed that it displays the semantic feature [+modal], even if one decides to examine imperfective ergatives only of the type (1b). I should treat such sentences more like generic statements which describe inherent properties of their subjects. In other words, the action denoted by the verb is somehow the result of these subject properties (and is largely irrelevant to the existence or not of a specific agent). So the middle construction *these boats sink easily* shows that some inherent property of the boats (their poor quality), together with an abstract or specific cause, can be held responsible for the possibility of their sinking.

- (15) *aftes i varkes vuliazun efkola*  
 these the boats-NOM sink-ACT-3pl easily  
 'These boats sink easily.'

It is precisely due to this 'inherent property' interpretation that an ergative like (15) cannot cooccur with the sentential adjunct '*kata ti ynomi mu*' (= 'in my opinion'): *?kata ti ynomi mu aftes i varkes vuliazun efkola / ta aspra pukamisa lekiavun*. The result is judged at best as semantically odd by native speakers, since the content of the propositions expressed by the above ergatives is factual (a given and unchangeable property) and thus is unlikely to form part of a personal judgement.

Two possible paraphrases of (15) exist, giving rise to a 'property' interpretation rather than a modal one.

The first possible paraphrase offers evidence for an implicit cause but not for an arbitrary agent:

- (16) *aftes i varkes borun na vuliaksun ki apo mones tus*  
 'These boats can sink by themselves.'

The second possible paraphrase of (15) involves either a cause or an indirect agency effect.

- (17) *efkola bori kanis/o aeris na kani aftes tis varkes na vuliaksun*  
 'Anyone / the wind can make these boats sink.'

Indirect agency of this kind of course excludes the existence of the arbitrary agent characteristic of middles. Not only that, but the modality feature of the impersonal *bori* is ambiguous between the epistemic and root

sense. For these reasons I believe that non-affix mediated alternations in MG cannot be collapsed in one and the same category with middles.

What's more, standard ergatives are completely indifferent to aspectual constraints. They display the feature [-imperf.], and this does not alter their interpretation with regard to cause or agency effects.

- (18) Afti i varka vuliakse amesos ap' to tipota/apo ton aera/me ti  
 ðoliofþora tu eþru/ apo tis zimies pu tis prokaleses.  
 'The boat sank by itself/ by the wind/ due to the enemy's sabotage/  
 because of the damage you've caused'.

It should be noted at this point that, rarely, ergatives may imply the presence of an agent contrary to common belief:

- (19) I porta anikse horis diskolia / me sidirolosto  
 (Kakouriotis1994)  
 'The door opened without difficulty/ with an ironbar'

The reason I have stressed the importance of *kanis* paraphrasability is because it has been independently argued that MG *kanis* is an existential polarity item, and as such it is incompatible with the features [+perfective, +past]. Besides, *kanis* has been shown to be perfectly compatible with both habitual and modal environments [+imp., +nonpast].

- (20) \*Afto to krasi to **ipie** kanis efharista  
 this the wine-NOM it PERF-drink-3s anyone pleasantly  
 (21) Afto to krasi to **pini** kanis efharista  
 this the wine-NOM it IMPERF-drink-3s anyone pleasantly

The NPI item *kanis* is licensed mainly by modal operators. Specifically, it has been argued that if a modal operator is present in the semantics of every modal construction, it naturally follows that NPIs are freely licensed in the scope of modals, future subjunctives and imperatives, the latter being prototypical modal structures (Giannakidou 1993:142)<sup>5</sup>.

All essential properties of the middle in MG have thus been shown to derive from modality:

- a. aspect and tense specifications [+imp, +nonpast]
- b. arbitrary subject
- c. adverbial modification

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of these issues, see also Tsimpli & Roussou (1996).

#### 4. Adjunct middles in MG

In Dutch a type of personal middle can be formed where the derived subject is an adjunct: one can say *\*this knife cuts nicely* as well as *this meat cuts nicely*. The former example is acceptable in MG, too (*afto to maheri kovi orea*). In the cases where adjuncts are expressed in the form of prepositional phrases in the transitive counterpart of this 'personal' middle, as in (*one can write well with that pen / one can sit nicely on that chair*), the corresponding middle has the preposition disappear and the adjunct occupy the subject position. So, *\*that pen writes well* (also acceptable in MG) and *\*that chair sits nicely* are perfectly well-formed in Dutch.

These constructions, with an instrument as the subject, have been characterised as middles by Hoekstra & Roberts (1993) in their study of Dutch middles. Their MG counterparts have been analysed by Kakouriotis (1994), who argued that they are not middles but unergatives on the grounds that their main verbs are used intransitively. I do agree with this view, for the additional reason that such examples lack the feature [+modal]. Specifically, they imply that there should be at least a single event of writing/painting that must have occurred in order for (22) and (23) to hold true.

- |      |       |               |                      |        |
|------|-------|---------------|----------------------|--------|
| (22) | afta  | ta stilo      | ɣrafun               | orea   |
|      | these | the pens-NOM  | IMPERF-write-ACT-3pl | nicely |
| (23) | afti  | i boja        | vafi                 | kala   |
|      | this  | the paint-NOM | IMPERF-paint-ACT-3s  | well   |

In my view, (22) and (23) could be described as habitual / generic statements.

Besides, Levin (1993:39) has listed similar constructions in English under the instrumental alternation heading and not under the middle alternation heading. Below are some of the examples that appear in her classification:

- (24) this knife doesn't cut  
 the pen doesn't write  
 this oven cooks well  
 this lotion softens and protects  
 but see: *\*this hammer won't break (the window)*

#### 5. Constraints on the subject NP

An additional requirement for MG middles concerns their subject NP: it should refer to a **specific set** of a class or of a kind. The definite article in MG cannot guarantee definiteness<sup>6</sup> (a DP like *to vivlio* refers to the whole

<sup>6</sup> See Tsimpli and Stavrakaki 1998 (to appear in *Lingua*).

kind), so either the demonstrative or modification by an adjective are required. In the latter case only does the syntactic subject become specific.

- (25) \*to spiti                      xtizete                      efkola  
          the house-NOM build-PA-3s easily  
          'the house is being built easily these days'

Clearly, (25) has a passive and not a middle interpretation.

Moreover, bare NP subjects are excluded from the middle in MG; the examples below have a passive meaning:

- (26) polunte      δjamerismata /      δaktilyrafunte ergasies  
          sell-PA-3pl flats                      type-PA-3pl essays

## 6. Generics & modality

A few preliminary comments will be made in this section on the relationship between generics and middle constructions. Recent literature on MG middles (Sioupi 1998) has identified middles with generics. This seems partly but not totally true, because in view of the modality story the above relationship can be further refined. The following table classifies the four transitivity alternation types according to genericity and modality.

		Generics [+/-modal]	
actives	ergatives	middles	passives
- / +	--	+	--
<b>active</b>	o janis ayapai efkola		
<b>ergative</b>	aftes i karekles δiplonun (in contrast with nonfolding chairs)		
<b>middle</b>	afti i tenia vlepete efyarista		
<b>passive</b>	to vivlio δjavastike epitelus		

Clearly, middle constructions form only a subset of generics; moreover, it becomes obvious from the table above that it is the modality interpretation that turns middle constructions into generic statements and not aspect or tense. The same goes for actives: their generic interpretation, when it obtains, is the result of their modality reading.

## 7. A remark on the role of adverbs and negation

Since a modality reading is compatible with an arbitrary agent only, we can safely predict that the addition of specific agent-oriented adverbials will render the following examples ungrammatical on the modal interpretation. The prediction is borne out:

- (27) \*afta ta vivlia δjavazonte prosektika  
       'These books read carefully'  
 (28) \*afta ta poukamisa kaθarizoun ayarba

'These shirts clean clumsily.'

Adverbial selection (manner/facility<sup>7</sup> adverbs) therefore also follows as a result of the modal interpretation.

The manner adverbial appearing in most middle constructions may sometimes be replaced by negation with no significant change of meaning:

(29) *den aȳorazonte afta ta spitia simera*

(30) *poli diskola aȳorazonte afta ta spitia simera*

Both sentences could be roughly translated as 'It's difficult to buy this sort of houses nowadays'. This would not be possible if we had passives instead of middles: *den aȳorastikan afta ta spitia* has the opposite meaning from *poli diskola aȳorastikan afta ta spitia*.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted a preliminary classification of the verbs that may undergo middle formation in MG. After briefly revising the constraints on middle formation already proposed for a number of related languages (English, French, German), I have suggested that the crucial requirement for middle formation in MG should be the modality reading. All standard properties of the MG middle were shown to derive from the semantic feature [+modal].

Ergatives (being a non affix-mediated alternation in MG) do not satisfy the modality requirement and thus cannot be classified together with standard middles in MG.

I have also addressed the issue of adjunct middles, as well as the relationship between generics and modality. Finally, I have made a brief comment on adverbial modification and negation in MG middles.

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<sup>7</sup> This term is borrowed from Vendler (1984).

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